

art & arbour

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Ask the Arborist

Question:

Last year the leaves on my small oak turned brown but did not fall. Many stayed attached to the branches until early spring.

Should I do something different this year? Is it okay to remove them? - Margaret H. in Kerrisdale.



Answer:

You're asking about *marcescence*, a leaf phenomenon that's intrigued botanists for centuries (fun fact: a student of Linnaeus wrote about this as early as 1749).

While its exact purpose remains a subject of debate, it's not harmful. Marcescence is common in oaks and beeches, especially in younger trees.

We advise against removing the leaves, as it could cause more harm than good.

Have a question?

Email us at info@arbutustree.ca



Autumn's Gold

Turn the litter of fallen leaves into a soil superfood

By Wade Janzen

Autumn leaves are gorgeous but often become a dreaded chore. Some advise to simply, "leave the leaves" for soil's sake. But can it be that easy? A few weeks of Vancouver rain and that vibrant quilt of colours becomes a sprawling, soggy mess. Those dense mats of leaves, promise protection from the muddy ground but slippery and more likely to turn our praise for a, "spectacular fall" entirely too concrete.

Fear not! Fallen leaves are a resource and the way forward is neither burdensome nor complex. Here's how:





Norm's Notes

By Norm Oberson

This August I visited Haida Gwaii for the first time in years. I had almost forgotten that everything there is bigger: eagle-sized ravens, traps brimming with Dungeness crab the size of dinner plates and west coast trees just about as big as they get.

While hiking deep into an old growth forest, I found myself surrounded by cedars and spruce so large a bear could make a den in each one. Being curious (and seriously brave) I crawled into several old black bear dens: uprooted sitka stumps with large burrows carved from wood, soil and stone (photo top).

It is easy to forget that Vancouver was also home to long-lived giants (photo right). My whole adventure had me thinking about why I love tree preservation and the planting of iconic west coast species.

Fall is a great time to plant a tree. If you have the spot and the space, I recommend you get a west coast species like Western redcedar or douglas-fir. If space is an issue, go for a Pacific or red-osier dogwood.

Either way, get your tree in the ground before October's end. You may just have a legend in the making.

For Lawns - Shred it and Spread it

- Do not let the leaves become a wet blanket. Use the mulch setting on a lawnmower to break dry leaves into smaller bits for quicker decomposition.
- Sprinkle the shredded leaves thinly, aiming for a depth of no more than 1/2" inch; allow the grass to show through. Shredded leaves will help prevent soil leeching in wet weather and enhance moisture retention come summer.

For Trees and Gardens - Mulch it or Mould it

- Rake and distribute leaves as mulch around plants to protect and nourish. Aim for a height of several inches (1" to 3") but keep the mulch at least four inches (4") away from the base of stems to maintain this critical site of air exchange.
- Looking for something dead easy? Use the power of fungal (vs bacterial) decomposition with "leaf mould". Dump wet leaves in a wire corral or some garbage bags with a few pencil holes and then forget about them. Come spring you will find that you have created some seriously incredible mulch for woody plants.

Below: Turns out bears are not the only large creatures that make homes out of ancient stumps. In 1910 there was a three-room "stump house" located at what is now 4230 Prince Edward St.



Photo source: [City of Vancouver Archives](#).